

Before embarking, drivers must know own ability

At the TME Technical Center in Brussels, Belgium, the drivers underwent their final training before beginning the European leg. Left-hand steering, roundabouts, and driving on the right side of the road - the training aimed to familiarize drivers with conditions that differ from Japan. Most important is the ability to go with the flow of traffic, which is influenced not only by differences in driving skill but also individual experience levels. Having never driven in Europe before, Mori-san from the Vehicle Development Technology Division seemed nervous despite having S1 (top level internal test driver) qualifications. Even

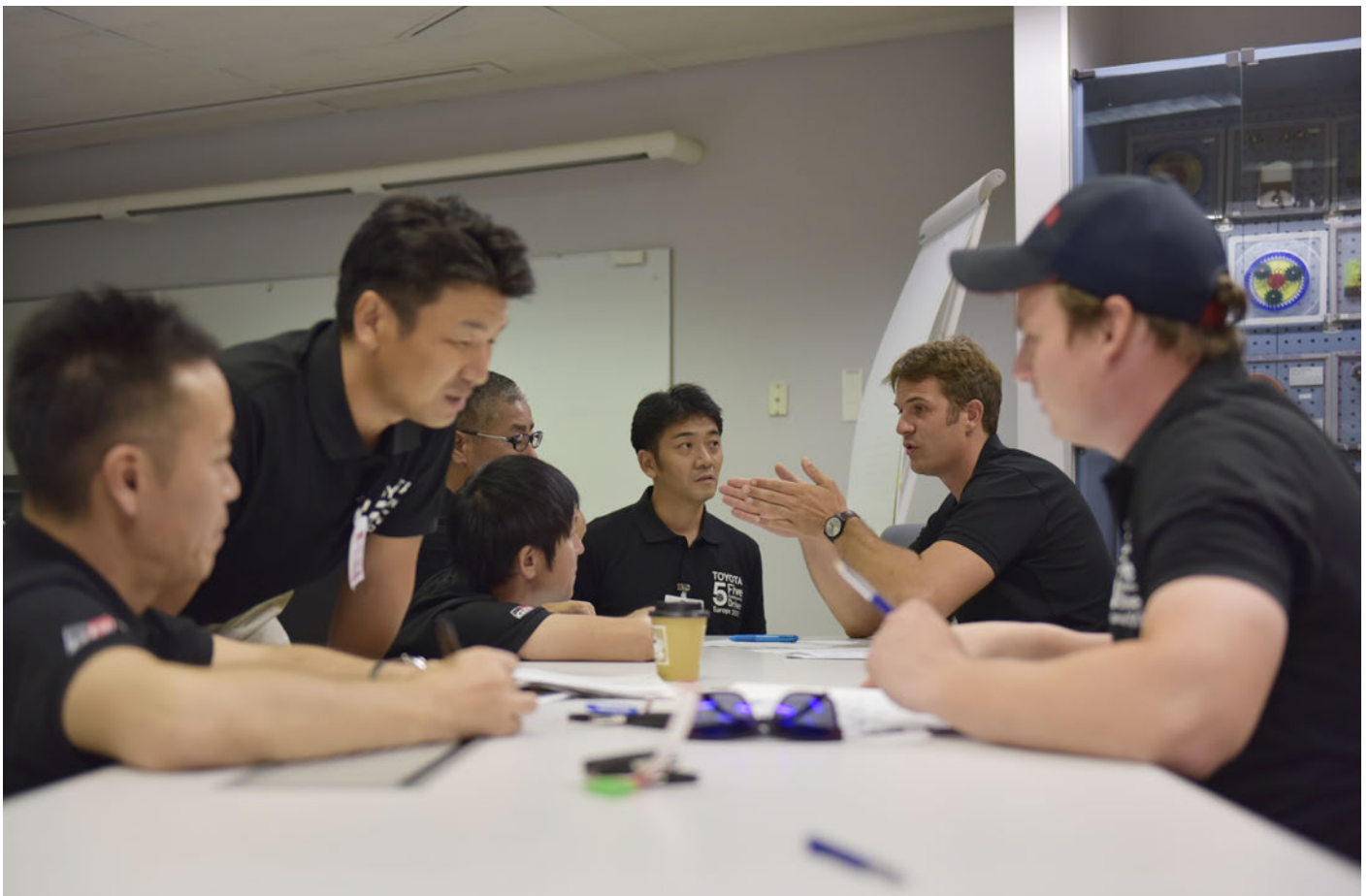
though the roads of suburban Brussels are not particularly busy, his involuntary sigh when pulling up to traffic lights clearly conveys the difficulty of driving among unfamiliar signage.

Pedestrians are always given priority at crossings, and school zones have a strict speed limit. Even on city streets that seem so haphazard at first glance, each vehicle upholds the orderly relationship between people and cars. "When passing a car going the other way, drivers make eye contact and greet each other with a small wave of the hand," says a smiling Tsuchiya-san, also from the Vehicle Development Technology Division. "The fact that such simple things are commonplace makes it a very pleasant environment. I think this is

also part of a long-established driving culture."

As this leg gets underway and the roads become more familiar, the drivers may find themselves more intimately acquainted with this culture.

The next day, we set off towards Germany on the Autobahn. Being able to visit another country in just two and a half hours was another new experience for TMC members. It was an opportunity to recall the differences between individual European countries, as explained by Ide-san, who is in charge of the European leg at TME's R&D Division. Despite being lumped together as part of Europe, countries may differ in how roads are made, which cars are popular, and even attitudes towards driving. According to





Ide-san, drivers need to give themselves greater leeway in order to recognize such differences.

"If you are no longer able to check your side mirrors frequently, it means you've gone beyond your limits. If you can no longer see yourself objectively, please slow down," says TME's Miwa-san, who serves as an instructor on safety. Riding in the same car, Usami-san from Engineering Information Management offers a first impression of the Autobahn: "When you're doing more than 170km/h or so, your visibility decreases." As speed increases, mental strain causes field of vision to narrow. And yet, even driving at 170km/h other cars still speed by, going even faster. This environment, starkly different to Japan, exemplifies the location of the upcoming European leg.

Drive focusing on cars, not natural environment

Having participated in all of the Continent Drives to date, Sekiya-san of the Advanced Technology Development Division explains how this leg will differ from the others.

"I think in past legs we mainly considered our vehicles in relation to the natural environment. Whether it was dust clouds or high elevations, the environment itself was unique. However, this summer leg features no special environments; instead, the focus will be on the performance of the vehicles themselves."

Moving to the starting location in Porto, Portugal, the vehicles are outfitted for the upcoming leg. The Georgian mechanic, who goes by the name "Koka", works hard to keep things progressing smoothly while

eagerly chatting with the Japanese members. Suzuki-san from the Production Engineering Division tells how the driver training helped to provide a clearer image of the road ahead, which also assists with maintenance. Preparations continue busily, everyone playing their part to ensure a safe and successful leg, waiting eagerly as the Monday start date draws near.

Reporter ○ Toshiya Muraoka

